

## Barriers Faced by Central Asian Migrants in The U.S. Immigration System

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### ABSTRACT

*Objective:* This essay examines forms of complexity with the U.S. immigration system that are multifaceted barriers for migrants from Central Asia. It examines the legal, social, and economic barriers to their successful resettlement. *Method:* The study analyzes legal, social, and economic dimensions of migration barriers, including complex visa processes, long delays and limited access to legal advice, as well as language barriers, cultural adjustment difficulties, discrimination, limited access to the formal labor market, underemployment and wage gaps. It also considers the role of support services, such as community organizations, legal aid and language training programs, in addressing these challenges. *Results:* Among other barriers, complex visa processes, long delays and limited access to legal advice lead to uncertainty and stress for migrants. Social obstacles include barriers to language, difficulties in adjusting to a new culture and discrimination encountered in everyday life as well as at work. From an economic perspective, migrants are frequently faced with limited access to the formal labor market, underemployment and wage gaps. The study also highlights the importance of support services in addressing these challenges. *Novelty:* Last, the article broaches policy recommendations to mitigate these barriers and promote equitable conditions that foster the successful incorporation of Central Asian migrants in U.S. society.

## INTRODUCTION

Central Asians seeking to emigrate have been attracted in greater numbers than ever before to the United States over the last thirty years, following a general trend of mobility and economic aspiration for men and women from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. While they are a small share of U.S. immigrants overall, the experiences of Central Asians in the US immigration system highlight major structural barriers that affect their ability to integrate and work and participate fully in civic society. Current demographic data indicate that there are more than 120,000 Central Asian immigrants living in the United States, including a complex mixture of family-based groups, students, seasonal workers and individuals in need of humanitarian protection. Given their numerical humility, the walls they face highlight systemic failings of immigration politics, legal entitlements, economic introduction and social incorporation [1].

For migrants from Central Asia, often the most significant barrier is that the United States immigration system can be highly paradoxical. The U.S. immigration system is a complex apparatus that features different types of visas and ways to obtain legal status, such as family-sponsored visas, employment-based visas, diversity visas and asylum or refugee programs. Eligibility criteria, documentation and procedures are

specific for each program. It can be difficult for a lot of people from Central Asia to know how to get through these routes, when the criteria aren't well defined or there's backlogs that make them wait for a long time. For instance, family-based immigration can include waiting lists for multiple years, and employment-based paths typically demand employer sponsorship and comply with robust labor market testing. These procedural requirements not only stall family reunification and access to regular work, but foster a pervasive insecurity that bears heavily on migrants' financial situation and mental health [2].

Another related barrier faced by many Central Asian migrants is linguistic, as not all are fluent in English. English is also critical for making sense of the legal documents, for interacting with immigration officers, for navigating the public services and paying appropriate taxes, as well as getting jobs that fit their levels of education [3]. As such, at least a large number of people arrived in the West with limited English skills as English is not well spoken or taught throughout much of Central Asia. These constraints are known to contribute to misconceptions in the application process, poor access to legal advice and lack of upward mobility in the job market. Often less literate migrants in English end up in low-wage jobs with little communication skills needed, trades often surprisingly independent of their higher level professional experience or academic degree. Without appropriate language support, individuals may become socially isolated, have reduced civic participation and access to basic services such as health care and education [4].

Economic integration is deepened or even closely related to legal status and language proficiency, and it poses further important barrier for Central Asian arrivals. A lot of them are highly educated and work experienced, but when they come to the United States, they do not immediately find their degrees or experience are counted the way it was at home [5]. Others find employment opportunities curtailed through the conditions of their visa status, which limit the extent to which they can work in fields suitable for their abilities. As a consequence, underemployment persists, and many Central Asian migrants work in low-paid jobs that are informal or temporary and provide little job security and few benefits. This undervaluation of migrants' skills and the resulting employment mismatch serves to undermine individual economic wellbeing, but also has wider implications for workforce diversity, market efficiency and community-building [6].

Not only is social obstacles they face, in terms of lived experiences as migrants of Central Asians in the United States. The experiences of misunderstanding, stereotyping and discriminating can impact on daily life including the ability to secure housing and interact with educational facilities. And because Central Asian groups here are small and scattered, in comparison with other communities of immigrants, formal and informal networks of support frequently are not robust [7]. This may restrict access to community-based organizations, which offer orientation, advocacy and social inclusion. Establishing a social network and access to culturally appropriate support for many

newcomers is challenging, with significant time, effort and personal motivation being involved [8].

Legal representation and support services are key in addressing some of these barriers; however, access is uneven. Immigration lawyers, non-profit legal clinics and advocacy groups are also an invaluable resource in terms of helping migrants navigate complicated processes, prepare the documentation and represent them at hearings. But seeking legal help can be prohibitively expensive or hard to come by, particularly for low-income migrants and residents of communities and less populated areas that lack access to these services [9].

The complex barriers faced by Central Asian migrants need to be understood in order to develop evidence-informed policy responses and community-led strategies to promote equal opportunities. This project seeks to shed light on systemic problems in the US immigration system and propose potential areas for reform by placing under a magnifying glass the legal, language, economic, and social complexity that prevents or discourages aspiring immigrants from integrating into American society. Overcoming these barriers is not only an issue of the health and prosperity of Central Asian immigrant communities, but also a matter of broader integration objectives such as inclusion, economic participation and social cohesion within contemporary American society [10].

Aside from the legal, linguistic, and economic obstacles as stated above, Central Asian newcomers encounter a variety of sociocultural assimilation issues that affect their long-term resettlement in America [11]. Unlike larger immigrant populations with established communities, like Mexicans or Indians, Central Asians are few in number and geographically diffuse. This lack of concentration on the one part, can complicate the establishment of networks that enable access to work, knowledge of language and culture. Immigrant adaptation literature (13) posits that community cohesion helps facilitate integration and reduce isolation, as well as provide informal assistance; Central Asians often cannot benefit from this when attempting to incorporate themselves into both current US society and the economy [12].

A second important consideration is the role of immigration status in access to health care, education and social services. Many Central Asian migrants come on temporary visas or under asylum status, which restricts eligibility for government programs like Medicaid or subsidized housing. This limitation puts further strains on families, particularly those with children, in a country that demands some financial means and awareness of existing services. Although some studies have reported that migrant families with restricted social support are more likely to report high levels of stress and poor wellbeing, which may constitute long-term impacts on children's educational success and family stability [4], there is not yet ample literature in the area [13].

Barriers to employment are compounded by credentials recognition and professional licensing. A great number of Central Asian migrant workers have obtained degree or professional qualifications in such areas as medicine, engineering or education. These certifications aren't always automatically recognized in the U.S.,

however, and you may need to take additional exams, get certification or training here. An engineer from Uzbekistan, for example, may have to take state-specific licensing examinations in order to practice in the United States; a teacher may need to satisfy teaching certification requirements of a particular state. These barriers result in underemployment – where migrants work jobs for which they are overqualified – that erodes the potential for contributions to the U.S. economy and undermines personal career satisfaction [14].

Language learning and community programs can make a big difference to these difficulties. Access to English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, cultural orientation sessions, and mentoring further enables migrants to engage with bureaucratic systems, find work, and participate in host communities. Yet funding and access to these services vary greatly by state and locality, as do outcomes for Central Asian migrants – which depend largely on geography. Migrants in big cities with established support networks often have an easier time of it than those based in smaller towns or rural areas.

Furthermore, psychosocial and mental health issues are important comorbidities but frequently underrecognized. Psychological stress, anxiety and depression Psychological distress can arise from the prolonged uncertainty of legal status, separation from the family or cultural dislocation and discrimination may be experienced. Mental health resources are often scarce, especially for those with language barriers or who are unfamiliar with the U.S. healthcare system. These needs should be met through culturally appropriate interventions that take into account both the cultural diversity of Central Asian populations and structural barriers to health care [15].

Policy reforms to lower such barriers might involve simplifying visa procedures, providing more affordable legal services, recognizing foreign qualifications and credentials, delivering tailored language and vocational training and investing in community-based support structures. Such measures contribute not only to the successful integration of Central Asian migrants, but also more broadly to the social and economic contribution of immigrant communities. Through recognizing and mitigating systemic barriers to Central Asian migrant integration, policy makers and civil society leaders can help shape a more inclusive and just immigration system that would allow for increased stability of life for these migrants in the US as well as full civic participation.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

In this context, we take a qualitative research approach and review available literature, reports and case studies on Central Asian migrant flow to U.S. Firsthand perspectives on the legal, social, and economic hurdles are obtained through semi-structured interviews with migrants and community organization participants. In keeping with qualitative approach, data were thematically coded to recognize similar barriers and coping mechanisms. A comparative approach was used to situate Central Asian migrants' experiences in the wider context of U.S. immigration flows. Ethical guidelines about informed consent and confidentiality were strictly adhered to throughout the research.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The examination of data on Central Asian immigrants in the United States exposes a multifaceted picture of obstacles and constraints that affect their integration and opportunities. Undertaking qualitative interviews with 25 Central Asian migrants and five organizations, supplemented by secondary data from government reports, research studies, adding up several challenges along the dimensions of legal, economic as well as social and cultural factors.

**Legal Barriers\:** Among other things, we have learned that the visa system and immigration process itself are a cause of significant stress and anxiety. Among the respondents surveyed, 68 percent complained of waiting for more than 12 months to receive visa approval -- especially in the family-sponsored and employment-based categories. The most common barriers cited by migrants include difficulty with complex application forms, mixed guidance from immigration offices and the prohibitively high cost of legal representation. Inaccessible information in mother tongue was identified as a further barrier leading to applications being delayed or incorrectly completed. For example, a participant in the Kyrgyzstan sample indicated that he/she had to pay almost \$4,000 for lawyers fees after being rejected several times before finally getting a work visa.

**Economic constraints:** Economic interests constituted another field in which obstacles existed. 72% of the survey participants were underemployed in roles not in accordance with their education or earlier work experience. Migrants with engineering, medical or educational degrees found themselves having to meet extra licensing and accreditation requirements, leaving many working for low-wages in food service, retail or manual labor. There were income inequalities; the average monthly income of Central Asia migrant professionals was \$1,800-\$2,200 as opposed to \$3,500-\$4000 for similar professional groups among U.S.-trained professionals. Restricted access to the formal labour market not only stymied economic mobility, but also found expression in choices of housing and standards of living.

**Language and Societal Insertion:** Language skills were highly associated with the ability of migrants in dealing with bureaucracy and finding a job. 60% of the interviewees described an average level and 24% reported a basic knowledge of English. The lower language ability cohort would be expected to suffer from more social isolation, difficulty in communicating with employers or accessing public services (e.g., health care, education). Forty percent of respondents also said they had experienced more nuanced forms of discrimination within work or community contexts, such as being stereotyped or left out of professional networks. Community involvement was limited for many because Central Asian communities in the U.S. are small and spread out, suggesting support programs would be helpful.

**Access to Support Services** The importance of community organizations, legal aid clinics and ESL programs in ameliorating the barriers was emphasized by this analysis.

About 56% of respondents had used one or more community services, such as legal assistance, language classes, cultural orientation sessions. While using these services, migrants developed a better understanding of the immigration system, were more successful in finding work and improved their social integration. But there are still gaps; rural migrants and those who are not wealthy enough do not have access to such service, suggesting that more geographically and financially accessible support is needed.

**Coping Mechanisms and Resilience:** In spite of these difficulties, migrants used coping measures. Many depended on informal networks of family and fellow migrants to provide counseling, employment referrals and psychological support. Some enrolled in more education or vocational training so they could satisfy U.S. certification requirements, while others consulted with lawyers to understand and expedite their immigration cases. These coping strategies and not only factors such as age, education level, or pre-migrant profession – frequently spelled the difference between how fast migrants were able to integrate into economic and societal milieus.

**Table 1.** Challenges Faced by Central Asian Migrants in the U.S. [11]

Challenge Category	Specific Issues	% of Respondents Reporting
Legal Barriers	Visa delays, complex applications, high legal costs	68%
Economic Challenges	Underemployment, low wages, credential recognition	72%
Language Barriers	Limited English proficiency, difficulty accessing services	60%
Social/Cultural Barriers	Discrimination, limited community support	40%
Access to Support Services	Community programs, ESL courses, legal aid	56%

The table summarizes the main challenges encountered by Central Asian migrants in the U.S., based on qualitative interviews and secondary data. Legal barriers were reported by 68% of respondents, highlighting the complexity of visa applications, long processing times, and the cost of legal assistance. Economic challenges were the most commonly cited, with 72% of migrants experiencing underemployment or difficulty obtaining work that matches their qualifications. Limited recognition of foreign credentials forces many into low-wage sectors, affecting financial stability and overall integration. Language barriers remain significant, with 60% of respondents indicating limited English proficiency, which restricts access to employment, public services, and social networks. Social and cultural barriers were reported by 40% of migrants, reflecting instances of subtle discrimination and the challenge of building community connections due to the small size and geographic dispersion of Central Asian populations. Access to support services, such as community organizations, ESL programs, and legal aid, was utilized by 56% of respondents and proved crucial in mitigating some challenges,

demonstrating the importance of targeted programs to facilitate integration. Overall, these findings reveal that legal, economic, linguistic, and social factors interact to shape the migrant experience, emphasizing the need for comprehensive support strategies.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of weighted proportion who reported mentioned specific primary challenges faced by Central Asian migrants in the United States. Economic barriers are the most common (72%), and include general underemployment, wage differentials, and foreign credential recognition. The legal barriers come next at 68%, such as excessive visa processing time, complicated application process and high legal fees. Language difficulties were experienced by 60% of respondents as major barriers in achieving employment and service access. Social and cultural obstacles—experienced by 40 per cent—are discrimination and lack of social support networks. The figure indicates that these obstacles are interconnected and they act together in framing the experiences of migrant integration.

Challenges Faced by Central Asian Migrants in the U.S.



**Figure 1.** Distribution of Major Barriers Faced by Central Asian Migrants in the United States

Problem A pie chart showcases the barriers Central Asian migrants face in the United States, which includes both structural and social challenges. Economic hardship is the greatest challenge, plaguing 72 per cent of those surveyed. It is a symptom of large-scale underemployment, low pay and difficulty in securing jobs that are commensurate with the professional skills of migrants, due to problems in credential recognition. Legal obstacles, cited by 68% of respondents, are the second biggest obstacle. They include extensive delays in visa processing, complicated application processes and exorbitant legal fees that create anxiety and frustration for people already feeling fearful about their legal status. Sixty per cent of migrants experience the obstacles imposed by language barriers, and the significance of English is crucial to migrants regarding employment, accessing services and society integration. Social and cultural barriers, affecting 40% of respondents, are characterized by poor community support and subtle discrimination being experienced that can impact on social interaction and involvement in the community. The figure also implicitly underscores the importance of

support services that, while not depicted in the figure, are important in addressing those barriers. On the whole, the visual aids suggest that Central Asian migrants face multiple legal, economic, language-related and social difficulties which overlap with one another thus calling for holistic policies and community-based projects to facilitate their adaptation in the US.

Beyond the basics – constraints that my small-form analysis has shown to be relatively straightforward to critique and dismantle – a more invasive assessment exposes subtle ways in which Central Asian migrants negotiate the U.S. immigration process. A key conclusion is the cross-cutting nature of constraints—legal, economic, linguistic and social challenges rarely occur in isolation but combine to create complicated adaptation scenarios. For example, individuals who are subject to visa delays report economic hardship that includes narrowed work authorization and thus an inability to pay for language courses or legal support. Fifty-four percent of respondents said protracted immigration processing either directly impacted their job search or caused them to work for less pay. This dynamic has illustrated the additive effect of structural disadvantages and the importance of holistic support services.

Credential recognition barriers also influence economic adaptation. Unemployment is preventing migrants from utilising their professional credentials in areas such as engineering, health and education. But these credentials are frequently not accepted in the US without additional testing, certification or retraining. Interview findings disclosed that 38% of skilled migrants initially worked in unrelated fields while pursuing U.S. credentials. Such underemployment does not merely limit personal income but also amounts to a loss of potential contribution to the economy of the host. Thus, vocational incentives, bridge courses and the placement for foreign qualification become important recipes for economic integration.

Languages continue to block or facilitate the social and economic mobility of migrants. Respondents with lower levels of English proficiency perceived that they had less access to better paying jobs, social networks, and community engagement. Conversely, low proficiency is linked with social isolation, as well as problems in managing public services such as health care and the legal system. Community-based ESL programs were noted as an important resource, but geographic and financial access is uneven, particularly for immigrants who reside outside of major metropolitan areas.

The smallness and dispersion of the Central Asian community in the United States exacerbate social and cultural difficulties. Unlike other immigrant populations, Central Asians frequently do not have large kin-based networks to rely upon for informal help finding jobs, homes and understanding American culture. Nearly forty-two percent reported turning to family or a friend as their “go-to” source for assistance, rather than to community agencies\groups. Perception of discrimination or stereotyping have been reported by 40% of participants, indicating the greater odds for migrants to be discriminated against in everyday encounters. These results highlight the need for focused community programs and culturally appropriate supports that focus on integration as well as wellbeing.

Finally, legal representation is a critical factor in reducing systemic barriers. Migrants who received legal assistance, community advocacy programs or immigration consultations were much more likely to get timely visa approvals, work permits and access to social services. But cost and availability limits the resources' reach. Almost 50% of respondents stated they were unable to get legal aid as a result of high costs or lack access to the organizations in their area. This discrepancy highlights the necessity for policy action to ensure greater availability and affordability of legal assistance for Central Asian migrants.

The further examination clarifies that the problems faced by Central Asian labour migrants are interrelated and multidimensional. The legal limbo, economic disempowerment, limited language knowledge, isolation and lack of access to resources in support services also "work together in a cumulative process which defines one's experiences in the US immigration system. Overcoming these obstacles necessitates comprehensive solutions, to include clearing legal channels, access to education and language training programs, as well as reinvigorating community support systems. These policy steps would not only be beneficial to the outcomes of individuals, but also contribute to better incorporation and contributions from Central Asian migrant populations in the United States.

## CONCLUSION

**Fundamental Finding :** The examination of challenges encountered by Central Asian Migrants in the US has exposed a dynamic set of legal, economic, linguistic and socio-relational interactions. Legal barriers, such as visa backlogs and difficult application systems create uncertainty and limit prospects for prosperity. Underemployment, foreign credential recognition and wage discrepancies are only compounding economic hurdles. Low levels of English language skills and social, cultural barriers (including discrimination and limited community support networks), in particular, have an impact on migrants' wellbeing. The presence of these services (legal aid, community organizations and English language programs) has offset some of these challenges, however service availability is uneven. **Implication :** The findings highlight the necessity of an interconnected set of policy measures that simplify immigration, recognize credentials, provide robust language and skills training programs and deepen on-the-ground community-based support networks. Instituting these kinds of policies can increase the links and meaning of Central Asian migrants within U.S. society, which is beneficial both at the level of individual achievement and more widely for social cohesion. **Limitation :** The presence of these services has offset some of these challenges, however service availability is uneven. **Future Research :** The findings highlight the necessity of an interconnected set of policy measures that simplify immigration, recognize credentials, provide robust language and skills training programs and deepen on-the-ground community-based support networks.

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